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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO, ELA, NEA/IZ
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SUBJECT: RE-ENGAGING SYRIA: TOWARD A SIX-MONTH PLAN

REF: DAMASCUS 669

Classified By: CDA Chuck Hunter for reasons 1.5 b and d.

¶1. (S/NF) Summary: March 2010 will mark the end of the first year of U.S.-Syrian engagement. As reported reftel, this period poses a series of formidable challenges. Syrian policies continue to impede government formation in Lebanon, support foreign fighters going into Iraq, maintain close ties with Iran, Hizballah, and Hamas, and reject calls from the IAEA to cooperate. Our engagement efforts have established relationships that will enable us to discuss these subjects, but Syrian officials remain less willing to accept their responsibility in addressing core issues.

¶2. (S/NF) With the trilateral border assessment initiative now all but dead, we need a replacement to demonstrate the ability of both sides to work together constructively. Beyond our focus on national security issues, we should be considering how to expand our contacts in other technical areas in which initial U.S.-Syrian contacts could lead to more routine interaction. Syrian interest in judicial and law enforcement reforms, expanding educational contacts, water management issues, urban planning, and NGO development provide just a few examples of areas in which U.S. government and private sector contacts could dramatically expand our access and influence. We need to frame these initiatives in broader terms of choices facing the Syrian regime and the need for concrete Syrian actions on Lebanon and Iraq for our engagement to continue. We also need to dangle what the Syrians really want -- relaxation of sanctions and visits by high ranking officials to expand our dialogue on core issues -- as a payoff once Syria has demonstrated its intent to utilize these contacts to build a more solid foundation. If we can advance these ideas over the next six months, we may increase our ability to persuade senior Syrian leaders that their country's interests is better served by more constructive policies that would bring even closer U.S.-Syrian ties. End Summary.

¶3. (S/NF) This cable is the second of a two-part series on engaging Syria over the next six months. It presents a few ideas on how to refine and our engagement strategy in the

national security area and other fields. It should be read in conjunction with an overview of Syrian views of recent events in the region.

Engaging Syria: Happy Six-Month Anniversary

14. (S/NF) September 7 marked the six-month anniversary of the opening of the Administration's engagement policy by the visit to Damascus of NEA A/S Jeffrey Feltman and NSC Senior Director Dan Shapiro. In those six months, as noted in reftel, we have seen both positive and negative movement by the SARG. On core issues -- Iran, Hizballah, Hamas, Iraq, the IAEA, and Lebanon -- the current SARG position has hardened and poses a variety of challenges. At the same time, we have seen some progress in the normalization of our dialogue between capitals and embassies, and we have the sense Damascus is keen to continue the dialogue.

15. (S/NF) The next six months pose a series of challenges for managing our relations with Syria. Government formation in Lebanon, defusing Iraqi-Syrian tensions while getting at the core issue of foreign fighters, winning Syrian cooperation for our efforts to promote the Palestinian and Syrian tracks, and finding a resolution to Syria's lack of cooperation with the IAEA represent the major tasks that lie ahead. Our engagement efforts have established relationships that will enable us to discuss these subjects, but Syrian officials remain less willing to accept their responsibility in addressing core issues.

What is The Objective?

16. (S/NF) From our vantage, the goal of engagement remains reaching a point at which the U.S. can constructively frame what it assesses to be the strategic choices facing the U.S. and Syria and how those choices bode for U.S.-Syrian relations. Syrian policymakers certainly do not view regional issues exclusively through the lens of bilateral relations with the U.S., but a better understanding of Washington's vision for better relations, and where positive choices by both countries could lead, might affect the Syrian calculus about what it stands to gain and/or lose. In this context, we would be able to explain to President Asad and others why continuing Syrian support for foreign fighters going into Iraq and Syria's interference in Lebanese affairs would make it politically impossible for the U.S. to continue engaging Syria unless we saw an end to these activities. It might also provide an opening to express our hope and expectation that Syria would support (or at least not oppose) U.S. efforts to create more favorable conditions for the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. Sometime during in this heart-to-heart dialogue, we need to find a moment to discuss Syria's ongoing problems with the IAEA as well.

After the Trilat, Now What?

17. (S/NF) The trilateral initiative represented an important stepping stone to establishing a relationship that would sustain such a conversation. Now that the trilat has fallen victim to Syria's dispute with Iraq, we need to find a suitable alternative and persuade the Syrians to go along with it. Part of the challenge will be to convince the Syrians the U.S. is not acting in bad faith by proposing another option for Syria and the U.S. to demonstrate their ability to cooperate. Syria believes it met this requirement and the U.S. should deliver on its part of the bargain. Overcoming this challenge will be difficult, particularly if Syrian officials perceive other indicators that the U.S. has weakened its commitment to engagement.

18. (S/NF) One approach might involve an effort to cast the

trilateral's unfortunate but unavoidable demise as an opportunity to develop a plan to navigate the difficult challenges that will face Syrian-U.S. relations during the next six months. The trilateral initiative succeeded as a concept not just because it triggered high-level governmental contacts, but also because it represented a true effort to expand bilateral U.S.-Syrian relations in an area in which there had been very little previous contact. Syrians might be persuaded by the argument that, in addition to maintaining a dialogue on priority issues for both sides, the U.S. attaches a high value to deepening relations in the security realm. While Syrian receptivity to this idea would probably depend to a large degree on who was conveying it, they may be willing to listen if we proposed it as a first step in a six-month trial that, if successful in the eyes of both sides, would yield some of the U.S. deliverables (visits, easing of sanctions, positive rhetoric, and closer bilateral coordination) the Syrians say they seek. At the end of this six-month period, the sides could each assess their progress and determine how to proceed.

19. (S/NF) Post views all of the ideas currently under discussion in Washington as tenable alternatives, including a counterterrorism dialogue and consultation on port security. Indeed, assuming the interagency supports these ideas, we would suggest that there would be merit in pursuing these options and others, to include assessments of airport security, infrastructure security, and eventually, if conditions ever permit, border security.

Additional Areas Ripe for Exploration

10. (S/NF) The next six months offer an opportunity not just to develop an alternative set of national security-related discussions with the SARG, but also to expand our contacts in other technical areas in which initial U.S.-Syrian contacts could lead to more routine interaction. If we can demonstrate our interest in expanding bilateral contacts, the Syrians might view our engagement more favorably. Syrian efforts to advance judicial and law enforcement administration, educational reforms, water management issues, urban planning, and NGO development provide just a few examples of areas in which U.S. government and private-sector contacts with Syrian counterparts could dramatically expand our access and influence. Some of these projects could be covered by International Visitor, Fulbright, or expert speaker programs. Others might require more coordination and funding that could draw at least in part on the FY 2009 \$2.5 million ESF allocation for promoting civil society development and democracy in Syria. A few ideas:

-- Joint study on alternative futures: One method to underscore the potential benefits of a Syria at peace with Israel and working constructively with its neighbors is to commission a study by RAND or another appropriate think tank that would examine how Syria would fare under different future scenarios, e.g., the status quo, achieving peace with Israel, or a regional war involving Syria and Israel. Syrian participation would be desirable to encourage buy-in.

-- An interagency team to explain sanctions: Recent announcements regarding an easing of the application of some U.S. trade sanctions have generated widespread interest in the business community about pursuing business with U.S. companies. An interagency team of experts from Commerce, Treasury, State, and other appropriate agencies could meet with official Syrian counterparts, business groups, and other audiences to explain the revised policy guidelines and how they affect Syrian businesses. Such a group might also explain other reforms under consideration. This step, like the previous suggestion, would constitute a tangible response to President Asad's request for a blueprint for improving the bilateral relationship. It could also be a logical follow-on to discussions that may take place during a hoped-for visit by Vice FM Miqdad to Washington in the coming weeks.

-- Youth education: The Syrian First Lady has established an umbrella for a number of NGOs that focus on youth education issues. She and her staff have worked closely with the Harvard Business School. We might consider proposing the visit of a team of public- and private-sector experts that could develop a plan of coordination and action with the First Lady's organizations and relevant ministries. As a reciprocal step, the U.S. side might consider inviting the Syrian First Lady to the U.S. to develop ties to U.S. organizations and expand potential cooperation.

-- Expanded business-to-business contacts: Building on previous visiting speaker programs, we believe Syrian entrepreneurs would respond positively to a visit by a group of visiting CEOs from high tech and other cutting edge firms to explain their vision of the future economy and the opportunities they envision for a developing country like Syria. Syrian officials and private-sector leaders are increasingly keen on attracting foreign investment, and such a visit would allow them to hear firsthand from American counterparts on how to develop viable strategies to achieve their objectives. We have also heard a great deal of interest in organizing a trip for Syrian businessmen to the U.S. This type of program could expose Syrians to a wide array of private and government organizations, establish personal and institutional ties, and stimulate advocacy for political and economic reforms in Syria.

-- Urban planning exchanges: Our contacts in the President's urban planning have responded enthusiastically to PD efforts to organize a special International Visitor trip. They have not only used their access to help obtain the necessary government approvals, but have also established a precedent for other government advisors to participate. They express a deep desire for access to their American counterparts. Building upon this desire and their upcoming trip, we could organize a visit by a U.S. team of experts for consultations on water and waste management, public transportation, and urban development planning.

-- Management reform experts: Many Syrian ministries are in the throes of efforts to streamline their organization and improve their ability to provide public services. Syrian businesses, moreover, are struggling to adapt their organizations to changes in the global economy. A team of government- and private-sector management experts would provide welcome expertise at a time when many Syrian organizations are desperate for outside guidance.

-- Drought and water management expertise: Syria's four-year drought has caused widespread dislocation and led the SARG to work with the UN on a \$50 million request for international assistance.

-- Justice system reforms: Syria's justice system suffers from rampant corruption, insufficient information management capabilities, and inadequately trained personnel. Supporting a UN project to improve customer service might pave the way for more cooperation in the law enforcement field.

11. (S/NF) We recognize this list is far from comprehensive, and many of the ideas will require refinement.

If we can initiate even a modest effort to engage Syria organizations in some of these areas, however, our ability to understand and influence Syrian thinking will increase. Without a clear signal of approval from their government, Syrians will react reluctantly at first to our proposals. But if we persevere and are able to advance a more systematic approach to bilateral engagement, we can dramatically expand our base of contacts and slowly coax Syrian counterparts away from their preferred approach of limiting discussions to a small group of diplomats and the Syrian President. For bilateral relations to advance and endure, especially in times when political contacts are strained, investing in a more robust approach will increase U.S. access and potentially its influence.

Giving Engagement Six More Months

¶12. (S/NF) We also fully acknowledged some may see little utility in seeking to expand our bilateral contacts at a time when there remain strong doubts whether engaging Syria can produce concrete results in the first place. Suspending our engagement or even returning to a policy of confrontation and isolation are always tempting options in reaction to the frustrating, stubborn, and sometimes disingenuous tactics of the Syrian regime. But we would argue that the policy of isolation ultimately failed because other countries, including Israel, France, Turkey, the UK, and others, saw value in engaging Syria as a way to provide alternatives to Syria's reliance on Iran and to offer positive incentives for Syria to behave constructively. Walking away from our policy of engagement after making a substantial investment in developing a relationship would not advance our goals of comprehensive peace, an independent Lebanon, and a stable Iraq. To be sure, engaging Syria provides no guarantee of success in reaching these goals. But if we are serious about giving our current policy a chance, we should give fair consideration to trying it in earnest and make an assessment after a reasonable period has passed. Convincing the Syrians will be difficult, but patience and persistence have achieved modest results since March. March 2010 will mark a year milestone in our new policy and would represent an opportunity for us and the Syrians to take stock.

Emphasize Stronger Bilateral Relations

¶13. (S/NF) In the interest of full transparency, we also need to be sensitive to how our policy would play in Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel. We defer to our colleagues in Embassies Baghdad, Beirut and Tel Aviv on reading how U.S. engagement of Syria will affect our bilateral relations in these capitals. We recognize our shared concern with these countries about Syrian-Iranian relations, Syria's support of Hizballah and Hamas, its interference in Lebanon, and its continuing tolerance of foreign elements supporting and, in some cases, committing violence against U.S. and Iraqi targets. At the same time, if we are to resolve differences with Syria on these and other issues, we need to take advantage of the opening created by our engagement policy to develop a more robust bilateral relationship not defined simply by these regional problems alone. Showing Syrians that we also value the pursuit of that more robust bilateral relationship may increase our leverage in addressing other, more intractable core issues.

HUNTER